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Aunt Yogi

Thiagarajah Arasanayagam

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Abstract

'Children, children, call your father.' That was mother calling from the ulmuththam. There was a tone of urgency, as though the end of the world was at hand; and in mother's case she believed that since father was the head of the house, only he could save it. In spite of the repeated calls we dared not disturb father. With all the excitement that was being generated, nothing could spoil the tranquility that a good cigar gave him. He sat on the front thinnai puffing away at a cigar he had rolled himself. He wouldn't even deem to inquire what the excitement was all about because he blamed all this on the hysteria of the womenfolk. He treasured moments like this, moments in which he could indulge in the pleasant ritual of cigar smoking. His pleasure was heightened by the fact that he never purchased his cigars from the village shops but got the tobacco leaves from a friend who cultivated and cured them to his exacting tastes. These long black leaves were wrapped in banana fronds in order to keep them damp; he would tear out the tobacco leaf necessary for a smoke.

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Meanwhile the excitement in the rest of the household continued. Children stood stupefied while the women scurried to and fro, chattering inconsequentially, but doing nothing constructive. The neighbours too came to see the meditating figure of our Aunt. In our village there was an Aunt in every family. She was part of the family set up, generally unmarried and an important appendage to the family system. She was loved and sometimes feared, a constant baby sitter who could be secretly cruel to her wards. Our Aunt was of course different from all these other aunts that lived in our village, in that she was given to religious pursuits and to deep meditation.

We called her Aunt Yogi, a name we thought was apt since we all thought she was on the road to yogihood, but in fact was short for Yogeswary. Now Aunt Yogi sat, eyes closed and cross-legged, on a thetpai grass prayer mat, deep in meditation; her body was taut and she seemed to have stopped breathing. Her arms and forehead were daubed with holy ash. We were used to her periods of meditation, but today it was unusually long and she had not come out of it. This alarmed mother. Father on the other hand was unmoved. He sat apart and at times of crisis such as this he was cynical, to the annoyance of the family.

'Let's hope the white ants will not build their nests over her,' he laughed when mother approached him for some relief. He ridiculed those myths about Yogis of

ancient times who meditated for months and years so that they were ultimately entombed by the rising mounds of anthills around them.

Unlike aunts in other families who were non-personalities, our Aunt Yogi wielded some power in our household, especially after this long bout of meditation. She was aware that she had won the admiration of the family and the neighbours. She declared Mondays and Fridays as days of fasting and meditation. We couldn't fathom her reasoning. While the handful of Christians in our village had only Sunday as a day of prayer, we wondered what divine inspiration made her declare two days in the week as holy days. The whole house had to be washed, the pots and pans scrubbed, saffron water sprinkled and incense burned. It was an upsetting experience for the whole family, though it was done in the name of some gods. The end result of all this was that we were irritable with one another, while Aunt Yogi calmly got on to her grass mat and went into her private world of meditation. To add to our misery the cooking of fish and mutton was banned, and the pots used for this purpose were relegated to the back yard, where they reposed on a makeshift rack, drying in the sun.

Long before the cock crowed and long before the women of our village had drawn milk from the cows, she was up. She pottered around in the dark, knocking over something or other, splashing water washing herself, and finally waking the whole household with her singing of devotional songs in a high nasal voice. Father would have been glad to get rid of her, give her in marriage, and he was very much afraid that she was getting on in years. But to his dismay she tolerated no talk of marriage. Many a proposal was rejected by her. Father's desperation knew no bounds. He offered all he could give as a dowry: money, a small piece of land on which he promised he would build a house, and the traditional set of jewellery every bride was supposed to possess. As a last minute idea, he even threw in a small piece of paddy field. Wasn't she his responsibility? He thought it imperative he should do something positive.

'She says her heart is with God; there is no room for anyone else,' mother said helplessly. Father only sighed a deep sigh of desperation.

Life in our home now began to change radically. This was because of an Almanac which had fallen into the hands of our Aunt Yogi. She read many a fast or feast, an auspicious or an inauspicious day, into this book. There was not a day in the calendar which was not significant to her religious obligations. On some days she would announce 'Attami-Navami, between 7:14 and 8:34, very bad time to go on a journey or do anything,' a warning we could hardly ignore. On other occasions it would be a dramatic foreboding. 'Today is Amavasai, the Black moon, the period of the dark serpents.' Such statements were ominous and we would not dare step out into the garden. By and by she eroded father's position as the head of our house. How could he make any decision when his very being was being subverted? The fear of failure and doom seemed to hover over his head. Finally, he too capitulated to her insidious onslaught, at least that is how it seemed to us.

He began to consult our Aunt about auspicious and inauspicious days; in other words he seemed to have given over his whole life to her Almanac. The womenfolk were of course pleased to see his maleness humbled. But what they did not know was that father had a tenacious disposition; though he appeared to have succumbed to Aunt Yogi's authority, underneath all this façade his mind was made up never to give up his attempts to settle her in marriage, which he considered his primary concern.

From the time father thought the time was ripe to get Aunt Yogi married, there was a constant floe of visitors to our house; people who came to look for a bride. Aunt Yogi was none the wiser as to who these people were, as father orchestrated the whole act in such a way that it would seem just a casual social evening. Those who came invariably looked forward to being served with sweetmeats, a tray of betel and hot cups of tea. They also expected to be presented, for their vicarious pleasure, with the spectacle of a maid dressed in her finery and bedecked with the family jewels, while they sat around making small talk, simultaneously scrutinising her with their microscopic eyes, as though she were a specimen for their analysis. This was not to be so in our home. In spite of the tea and the delicacies they had been served, they made an embarrassed excuse and left without much ceremony when they saw her. She presented an outrageous sight. Wrapped not in the finery of a would-be bride but in a plain washed saree, forehead and arms bearing the distinct marks of holy ash, she stood there smelling of incense and camphor; it emanated from her very pores. Even her hair was not oiled and combed as tidily as it should have been, but was tied in a most casual manner with a deft twist of hand.

During the evening when dusk had fallen, mother would relate stories from the puranas. We would sit round her and listen as gods fought the evil forces; they had constant battles with the Asuras who, demon-like, took different forms every time they were vanquished. How frightened we were of these dark nights, of the rustle of the palmyrah leaves or the distant hoot of the night bird. The other times we would sing devotional songs. These were happy moments. Aunt Yogi too was happy. She would pull out the old family serapina and accompany us with its wheezing notes. These were moments of Bhakthi. Mother told us 'the Devas are listening' and we sang to their presence. The sound of a voice or the flash of a light among the dark palmyrah palms were the portents we looked for. We believed that 'the gods are near us at that moment', but we were never comfortable about the idea of the unknown. Each one of us had our doubts and fears. Did God look like those stone statues we had in our temple? Or was he more frightening. Aunt Yogi was of course prepared to receive any of the gods. Mother, on the other hand, was very practical. She always cooked extra rice, so that there was some food left over in our pots after a meal. Mother said this was for the mysterious visitor. She said it could be Shiva himself or any other god who would appear in

the form of a beggar or mendicant. Gods wanted to test us for our charity and kindness, and they would reward us accordingly.

Aunt Yogi was not going to take a chance; she too waited for the arrival of the mysterious visitor.

To our annoyance it was only a common mendicant who would appear in the hot afternoon. Robed in saffron, daubed in holy ash, his matted hair tied in a knot and carrying the paraphernalia of his vocation he would call, 'Amma, oh mother of the house, feed a poor sadhu'. Standing in the front courtyard of the house, fanning himself with a palmyrah leaf fan, he would go on in undertones chanting the name of God; 'Shiva, Shiva, Shiva ...', the magic words falling softly like a soothing balm that would alleviate his misery. Aunt Yogi quickly prepared a place on the front thinnai for the sadhu to have his meal. He washed his betel-stained mouth, gargling and spitting out, with the water she offered him in a brass chembu. He sat cross-legged while she served him the rice and curries onto the plantain leaf she placed before him. She topped it all with ghee she had collected herself while churning curd every day. The sadhu first sang a few devotional songs, and then set out a handful of food on a piece of banana leaf which he left in the garden for the crows, the symbolic vehicle on which Saturn travelled. The birds would swoop down like a black cloud falling, cawing and fighting. It was after this that he would get back to his food. He fell over it hungrily. In no time the plantain leaf was clean of even a single grain of rice. Aunt Yogi followed him with her eyes and waited with bated breath for the 'miracle' to happen — the sudden revelation, the sudden transformation from lowly mendicant to the glorious Shiva. It never happened. But she never gave up. She continued to feed the holy men that passed through our village. They ate the food she offered, blessed her and the house and went their way.

Aunt Yogi frequented almost every temple. She knew about the poojas and the festivals that were being celebrated in each of them. At the great temple of Nallur we would follow the Bhajanai singers who moved behind the Thér, the resplendent chariot in which the God was being taken. The Thér was elaborately carved out of wood and stood a hundred feet in height. Drawn by the devotees who pulled and tugged at the long thick coir ropes, it moved slowly and heavily on its enormous solid wooden wheels. It was at one of these festivals that we encountered Ramalingam, who was also from our village of Navaly. He was leading a chorus of Bhajanai singers. A stout figure whose chest, shoulders and arms were covered with a profuse growth of hair that seemed to be recompense enough for the complete lack of it on his glistening pate, he stood in the centre of a group of singers. As they sang the Bakthi songs, he swayed from side to side in a trance. Nothing touched him, nor was he totally aware of his surroundings; the nadheswaram and the thavil, the clanging cymbal, the singing and dancing, and human beings crying out their praises to God.

Then there were others, bodies bare, rolling prostrate behind the Thér, expiating all their sins, and still others whirling past in groups, sharp minute golden spears glistening on the arms, chest and back, where they had been pierced into the flesh. Some had their cheeks pierced through, and carried on their shoulders a kavadi, a wooden frame decorated with peacock feathers. While they danced a few were held and guided by ropes that had been connected to metal hooks stuck deep into their bare backs. They didn't feel the hurt as the hooks pulled at their flesh, nor did a drop of blood flow.

Mother insisted that we accompany Aunt Yogi on her pilgrimages. Thus we went from temple to temple. Sellachchanathi, Maviddapuram, Nallur, Kataragama and Munneswaram. We visited them all. No temple seemed too distant to a mind like that of our Aunt. She had few possessions, so it was easy for her to take off.

'Don't worry, Akka,' she would say, 'God will provide annadhanam wherever his disciples go'. There were madams, places where pilgrims could rest. During the festival season there was plenty of food being cooked and served to the pilgrims by benefactors, in memory of their relatives who had departed this world. The food was cooked in enormous cauldrons and served on plantain leaves to the hundreds of pilgrims at the madams. Wherever we went Ramalingam and his group of singers would be there. There were other groups too at these festivals. They all whirled past us, singing, dancing, in a world of their own.

It was at one of these festivals that our Aunt began to act in a peculiar manner. She insisted that we follow Ramalingam's Bhajanai group as they went round the temple. She stood close to the group with the forlorn look. She even clapped her hands in unison with the group. We even saw her head sway a little. Would she start dancing, with hair falling loose like all those in the group? It was not uncommon for women to go into a trance and dance at these festivals. The sound of innumerable bells ringing, and the voices of thousands calling the names of the gods to the accompaniment of the pulsating throb of the drums, touched the very fibres of those devotees so that they could hardly restrain themselves from swaying and dancing. Here was Ramalingam again, leading the chorus, his body gyrating to the rhythm of the songs and drums. He wore a white veshti tied round his waist while the upper part of his body was bare except for a chain of large rudracham seeds hanging round his neck.

The triple stripes of holy ash stood out stark and white against his dark glistening forehead. He was not Ramalingam, the man from Navaly, he was here a part of the mass movement of whirling bodies, clashing cymbals, clapping hands, sweeping past in the sweating hot afternoon, moving with the mass rhythm, his individual micro-centric movement becoming a part of the merging into the wider, larger universal pulsating, the tala, the rhythm of life itself.

Our Aunt Yogi could not sleep that night in the madam. She was too full of the day's events. She spoke of nothing else but Ramalingam and his Bhajanai group. We were too sleepy to stay awake. Before long the madam was silent, except for

the snores of some of its inmates. Aunt Yogi continued her musings notwithstanding. Even after we went home, Aunt Yogi continued in the same strain. Mother was impressed with Aunt's praises of Shiva and all the gods, and especially by the fact that she had at last found a guru to lead her on the path to yogihood. Father, on the other hand, was alarmed, though he was also happy. While he was hoping to find a suitable partner for Aunt Yogi, he never dreamed that she would be enamoured of a Bhajanai singer. Mother insisted that Ramalingam was no charlatan. She had seen him at various festivals, and he not only impressed her, but the fact that he came from a good family reaffirmed her confidence that only he would be a suitable guru for our Aunt. One could never fathom what was in mother's mind when she decided that our Aunt must surely follow Ramalingam. Father had other ideas, and he held steadfast to them.

'Yogi, are you sure about Ramalingam,' mother was heard asking, to which Aunt Yogi replied with a deep sigh, 'Aiyo, Akka, there is no room for anyone else in my heart, he is my guru, and he and none other will lead me ... and Akka, I am prepared to follow him'.

Father, sitting on the front thinnai, was rolling one of his favourite cigars; he was listening to the conversation that was taking place inside the house somewhere. A smile touched his face. 'Once it was Murugan, the six-faced god she had given her heart to,' he told himself, still rolling the cigar meticulously; he even dared to laugh softly as the women were in the ulmuththam and out of earshot, 'now it is this fellow Ramalingam ... a bit crazy with his Bhakthi, but quite a steady fellow, with property too ... he will make a good match for our Yogi I am sure'.

Having rolled the cigar he tied the ends with a piece of thread and, chewing the loose pieces that protruded, he spat into the white sandy garden. Smelling it through its length he shook his head with satisfaction: 'the best from Inuvil,' he said, and struck a match. Mother's voice could be heard in conversation with Aunt Yogi while they rolled the mats on which paddy had been drying in the sun. Father had taken a few puffs, he was at peace. The bell at the Ganesh temple was now ringing, summoning the people to the evening pooja. Father put away his cigar and reached for the brass chembu of water with which he washed his mouth. It was time for a pooja and a thanksgiving to Ganesh.